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ABSTRACT

Student interest in reading and literature may be increased in several ways. Before students can learn to appreciate literature, they must be interested in reading. Teachers can motivate students to read by identifying the reasons for reading, showing students what benefits various reading materials offer. Teachers can also encourage students to read by expressing interest in the books that students have read (asking questions and suggesting other reading materials on the same subject) and by making books accessible in the classroom (developing a classroom library and setting aside class time for independent reading). Once the children have been motivated to read, teachers should introduce them to quality literature. This can be done by considering students' individual interests when choosing books for required reading, by having faith in students' reading abilities (not dominating discussion of a book and not analyzing the book's content in great detail), by using the original version of a literary work rather than an abridged version, by encouraging students to share books and discuss reading materials, and by involving parents in their children's reading activities. (RL)

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# MOTIVATING LIFETIME READERS OF LITERATURE

Thank you Dr. Sherman. It's a pleasure to be able to discuss with you reading, readers, and literature. Like many of you I like to read. I'd like others to experience the joy, excitement, and stimulation of reading literature.

The sad truth is that we who enjoy reading are in the minority of the population. Quite a few people do not read; many do not read literature. In 1956, Gray and Rogers (1956) developed a scale of reading in an attempt to locate and identify the mature readers in the adult population in the Midwest. One of the most interesting findings in their study was that no subject emerged with superior reading habits. Only by searching the country were Gray and Rogers able to find people who they could consider mature, active readers. Amiel Sharon (1973) in 1973 surveyed over 5,000 adults to find out what they read. Those that read chose to read newspapers, magazines, and the Bible. Although most of the people surveyed could read, Sharon points out that "there is a world of difference between what a person is able to read and what he actually reads.

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One who is able to read great fiction and poetry will not necessarily read it" (p. 152).

A reason often cited for the demise of reading is that other media compete for people's time and interest. With the television, radio, and stereo blarring away, few people feel the inclination to turn to books for information, relaxation, or enjoyment. Miriam Wilt (1970) has stated that teachers should spend much more time on teaching listening skills since children and teenagers spend many hours of their day listening. She has said, "The truth of the matter is that most of us are no longer readers; we are listeners" (p. 83). Reading is nice, but it is not always "where the action is."

Perhaps a more frightening reason people give for not reading is that they just don't want to read. They are uninterested in reading. They never realized the importance or the enjoyment they could receive from reading. Sadly, some people are almost afraid to read literature. Some teacher sometime told them about the "hidden meaning" in a novel. They didn't see it and are now afraid to look for themselves.

When "experts" talk about the lack of reading, they often try

to relate it to items like attitude, interests, motivational techniques, teacher's attitude, children's attitude, self-concept, home environment, socio-economic status of the family, first child, last child, and so on. All these factors are interesting but none has been shown exceptionally enlightening.

My intent this afternoon is not to try to oversimplify the problem I merely wish to offer a few suggestions, opinions, and techniques to increase interest in and time spent reading literature. Some of my suggestions are based upon research; others are gleaned from my experien and the experience of others. I hope they will be of some help to you i "turning children on" to the joys of reading literature.

I believe the task of turning children on to good books is a two-step process. First, we must motivate the children to read. Secondl we must introduce and encourage them to read literature.

Motivating children to become lifetime readers goes way beyond what is commonly referred to as "teaching reading." It is more than teaching the reading skills. While decoding, language-experience approaches, and the like are important tools, they should not be considered ends in themselves. Teachers too often get caught up in

the subject "reading" that they seldom explain why reading is important in the first place and never show that reading can be fun! Eller (1959) in a Reading Teacher article, states that many American children have learned their lack of interest in reading. They are so busy decoding and reciting words that they rarely stop or are allowed to stop and enjoy what they're reading. We must work to demonstrate to the children that reading is more than skill drills and workbooks to be done during the first ninety minutes of the day. Reading is an important part of the total school program. We read to find information in science, mathematics, social studies and the arts. The reading act encompasses the entire school curriculum and is an integral part of daily life.

Similarily, we must help children identify reasons for reading. In 1974, I studied the reading behavior of 276 children in eleven sixth-grade classrooms (Sostarich, 1974). I identified and interviewed some avid readers to find out what, if anything, they did differently than the average sixth-grader. One important finding was that avid readers could identify many different purposes or reasons for reading. They had a better understanding of the reasons for reading and the possible benefits they could acquire from reading. They saw their

reading as more than a limited school subject and were able to relate reading to many of their daily activities. Helen Smith (1967) noted that good high school readers were also able to recognize purposes for reading. Good readers know that some information can be skimmed while other material has to be studied in depth. They decide upon the reason for reading the particular material and then use an appropriate reading style. They know that they can skip words, guess at meanings, and even mispronounce words and still get the jist of an article. They also know how to use non-book materials like magazines and newspapers to learn about new things, to gain information and to enjoy another's perspective.

We should encourage <u>all</u> children to develop different reading styles to match the materials being read. To do this we should encourage children to read a wide variety of materials - magazines and newspapers as well as books. We should also help the children identify the reason or purpose for their reading. If the children know why they're reading, they are more apt to read.

Another way to encourage children to read is to be interested in their perceptions of what they read. Often we tell children what

they should be interested in reading. There are many studies which have examined children's reading interests and give lists of children's interests at various age level. These are fine guides but they must be adapted to specific children in specific classrooms. I have found it very helpful to ask the children what they are interested in reading and why. There are formal and informal interest inventories and attitude scales that teachers can use to get information about children's reading. Alexander and Filler (1976) in an IRA Bulletin, Attitudes and Reading list attitude assessment instruments as well as give examples of instruments teachers can develop ontheir own. Whatever method suits you best is fine; the point is to get the children's responses to reading. The best way to do this is to ask the children!

While interviewing the children during my research study, I found that the avid readers often had a special interest around which much of their reading centered. Two girls had developed an interest in people of other times and other cultures and were trying to relate to these times and places. These subjects had become a focus of interest to which most of their reading related. They read books and magazines to gain

more information about their interests.

Other children also develop interests in specialized topics. Teachers can provide books, magazines, and newspapers that will help children gain more information about their interests. If a child is interested in swimming, share with him or her the books, magazines, newspapers, pamphlets, and the like that talk about swimming skills and heroes. Explore varied media with the child and help him locate interesting articles. Then, share in his enthusiasm; ask him to talk about the information he reads.

This leads me to my next point. We must become involved in children's reading. Be interested, ask questions, and suggest books. Probably even more important, read to children. Most children can remember a teacher who liked books well enough to spend time reading and sharing her favorites with children. I can still see Miss Whitnal sitting there in front of the six rows of fifth-graders reading Mr. Popper's Penguins. Another technique that has worked for me is to "sell" or auction books to the class. I try to encourage children to read books by advertising them telling the children how much they'll

like the story, using a little "Madison Avenue" on them. Still another way to become involved with children's reading is to encourage library use. Teachers have to know how to use the library to help children find books and articles related to their interests. They also have to know how to act in the library. The teacher who hunts for books, shares favorites, and rewards discoveries is the teacher who encourages reading. Teachers may also choose to talk to parents. Parents' attitudes toward reading will be reflected in their children. The teacher may wish to point out to parents the need to encourage good reading behavior in the home.

Other techniques to encourage reading require the teacher to take a more passive role. Give the children time to read. By allowing them time in the busy school day to read, the teacher is silently saying, "I believe reading is a very important part of the day." While the children are reading, it is good if the teacher reads too. Children model their teacher's behavior. During this time it is not so important what the children read as it is that the children read. Please do not insist everything they read must be "good" literature. Peter Dickinson (1970) in a good article, "A Defense of Rubbish", points out adults do

not read a steady diet of quality literature. Children deserve the opportunity to have a varied diet of reading materials.

The classroom environment also has an influence on children's reading. Teachers and librarians should not overlook the motivational effect of classroom collections. These collections indicate to the children that reading is important. The collections should be within the reading and interest levels of the children and should be changed frequently. The goal is to make books accessible to children. Other materials in the classroom like charts, records, and displays can be used to "advertize" books and encourage children to read.

Along the same lines, we should not overlook the importance children place in owning their own books. Avid readers usually have a large, personal book collections. If children own the books, they are more likely to read them. If possible a book fair or book club could be established where children would have the opportunity to purchase books.

Another important part of the reading environment is the library. I suggested a possible role for the teacher during library time, but I also want to emphasize the importance of acquainting children with

the library and the materials available in the library. Too often the library or media center is considered a special place to visit once a week. Teachers have to encourage children to become familiar with the library. We must also give the children reasons for learning skills to unlock the library's resources.

I've listed several techniques or methods to encourage children to read. Since children do not automatically "turn on" to reading, teachers must actively encourage children's reading growth. If we can accomplish this, we have met a major objective of schooling. However, many children spend time reading but never read what is considered by many to be good literature. That is to say they stay with Snoopy and Nancy Drew and never move on to A Wrinkle in Time. Our second major objective, then, is to help children to appreciate and read quality literature.

There are several approaches we can take to move in this direction. First, it is very helpful if teachers, especially English teachers, choose required reading books with care and consideration for the students who are required to read them. I like to call this the "Moby Dick Phenomenon." I don't mean to pick on Melville's book;

it is an excellent novel and I've read it three times. However, too many teachers have been told that Moby Dick is a good novel, quality literature. So they require every student to read, discuss, and analyze it. I hope some of you were impressed to hear that I've read Moby Dick three times. Actually, I must confess, it was required by three different English teachers. I tell you this for a reason: think of the other books I could have been reading if the teachers had shown some imagination in books they required their students to read. There are other good books about modern day people with relevant problems as well as excellent science fiction and fantasy available for children and young adults. Teachers need to become acquainted with what is available. They need to choose what they require their students to read and what they select for their classroom collections with care. This brings me to an interesting, if somewhat sad, story. For a long time now, I had assumed that teachers were familiar with the good literature written for children and young adults. Last Spring I had the opportunity to teach a course in children's literature to a group of 26 elementary teachers from the Los Angeles area. The first night I mentioned we would use Charlotte's Web by E. B. White as a companion novel to the text. I also said that

I assumed everyone was already familiar with White's book. That was a mistake. Eight teachers in the class had never read Charlotte's Web; others had never heard of it. We need to become familiar with book lists and book reviews. We need to know books and students' interests to match the book to the student. The selection of books for required reading should show thought. Just because some expert somewhere labeled a book a "classic" does not mean your students will find it interesting and worth reading.

A second point, part of the "Moby Dick Phenomenon" is that while teachers are analyzing a book they tend to discuss it and remove all the enjoyment from the printed page. We must have more faith in the readers. My mom gave me Austin's Pride and Prejudice when I was in the seventh grade. She also gave me a few others she thought I'd enjoy and I read them. Soon the books my friends were reading seemed shallow to me. No one discussed plot structure, irony, or symbolism with me; but I learned, through reading, to compare books and found many books lacking. My point in all this, then, is to give students the opportunity to read and compare, and actively encourage and reinforce their reading. Don't

be so anxious to help the students "appreciate" great works by tearing them apart to find out what the author really means. This will not stop students from reading works of lower quality. But it will allow them to develop the criteria to judge what they read.

A third method to acquaint and encourage lifetime readers of literature is to give the students the opportunity to read the original, not the abridged novel. The author's version is the best.

In Rebecca Lukens' excellent book, A Critical Handbook of Children's Literature, Lukens discusses two versions of Tom Sawyer, the original by Mark Twain and a retold, simplified version by Albert O. Berglund. Twain's imagery and figurative devices spark this section:

> Presently they came to a place where a little stream of water, trickling over a ledge and carrying a lime-stone sediment with it, had, in the slow-dragging ages, formed a lace and ruffled Niagara in gleaming and imperishable stone. Tom squeezed his small body behind it in order to illuminate it for Becky's gratification.

The simplified, retold version loses the spark and uniqueness that is Twain:

> Soon they came to a place where a little stream, carrying limestone matter with it, had formed a falls of beautiful stone. Since Tom was small, he stepped behind the falls with his candle so that Becky might see the lacy stone lighted in all its glory.

If the students can't read the original, read it to them. Students, especially avid readers, remember the titles of books read to them.

Allowing students to share books is my fourth suggestion. Good and poor readers alike enjoy the opportunity to share and discuss what they have read. Often peer recommendations carry much more weight than that of the teacher. Avid readers read what their freinds are reading.

Finally, and ideally, involve parents. If we can turn them on to books, we will be encouraging the entire family to read. Children value what their parents consider important. Parents would talk to their children about their reading and share their own reading interests with the family.

In conclusion, our goal is to develop lifetime readers of literature. We know there's a world of beautiful description, fascinating thought, and stimulating ideas in books. We must work to actively encourage children and young adults to open thecover of a book and read. I firmly believe that once they have had the opportunity to fully experience good literature, they will continue to read.

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